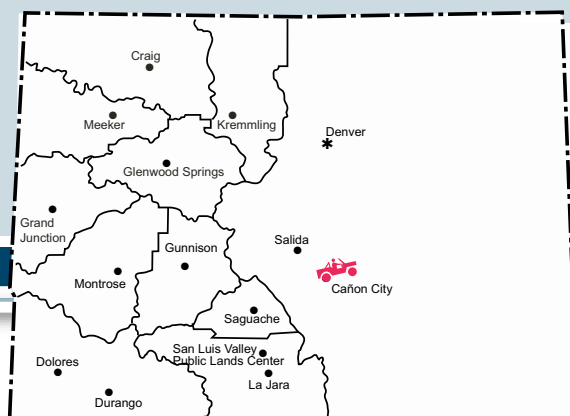


COLORADO

Royal Gorge Field Office



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A Day on the Gold Belt Tour National Scenic Byway

By Denise I. Adamic

A cool breeze whispers through golden leafed aspens and tickles the needles of piñon on an autumn afternoon in the backcountry of Colorado. Gentle wisps of dust settle upon the same sun-kissed road that many of Colorado's pioneers, miners and entrepreneurs have traveled.

For visitors, this is more than a Sunday afternoon escape from town, however. This is a hidden treasure known as the Gold Belt Tour National Scenic Byway – four roads that guide one-and-a-half million visitors annually through the panoramic views of central Colorado while retracing the state's mining and ranching history. The Byway follows historic railroad routes, stage coach roads, and trails resulting from the Cripple Creek and Victor Gold Rush.

Although the Byway serves as a scenic getaway and offers countless forms of recreation, many find themselves drawn to the area for the same reason thousands of other visitors have come here – to explore the world renowned rock climbing at the Shelf Road Recreation Area.



The Shelf Road Recreation Area appeals to climbing enthusiasts for many reasons, including its high level of difficulty and the fact that its routes are designed and maintained by national and international experts.

"The limestone rock formations in the area provide very technical routes," said Mark Hesse, Executive Director of Rocky Mountain Field Institute (RMFI). "The area offers five canyons and 700 to 800 climbing routes."

The area is managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) through a partnership with RMFI, a non-profit organization dedicated to outdoor adventure and the national and international preservation and protection of wilderness areas.



BLM manages the land and resources in the area, providing free day use, inexpensive scenic camp sites, and vault toilets. RMFI assists with planning and management and provides technical climbing expertise for the area. The group also builds and maintains several miles of foot trails that traverse the climbing area.

“This area is a good example of a great partnership between the BLM and user groups,” Hesse said.

Although sport climbing developed at the Shelf Road Recreation Area in the 1970s, this partnership formed in the early 1990s when the number of users at the area multiplied as word about this climbing playground spread through the rock climbing community. The technicality, combined with the area’s beauty, brings visitors from around the world to this area.

Cora Whisenhunt, a Recreation Planner for BLM’s Royal Gorge Field Office, has met climbers from Canada, Germany and Russia in the area. “People really appreciate having an area like this and only having to pay \$4.00 a night to camp here,” Whisenhunt said.

Another selling point of the recreation area is that it provides a prime spot and alternative to high altitude climbing. The south aspects and elevation of the recreation area offer climbers a longer, technical climbing season on easily accessible public lands.

“The niche of this area is its availability for three seasons; spring, fall and winter climbing,” said Diana Kossnar, an Outdoor Recreation Planner and the current Acting Support Services Supervisor for the Royal Gorge Field Office. “The only season climbing numbers go down is in the summer months when the days are hot.”

The climbing area averages 32,000 people a year. About 90% of those visitors come to the area to climb, while others enjoy camping, mountain biking, hiking, horse back riding, and ATV riding.

The Shelf Road Recreation Area is just one example of the important sites found on the Gold Belt Byway. Visitors can also find internationally recognized geological and paleontological areas such as the Garden Park Fossil Area, Florissant Fossil Beds National Monument, and the Indian Springs Trace Fossil Area. From the Byway, visitors have access to the Beaver Creek Wilderness Study Area, as well as numerous hiking, camping, hunting, fishing, and wildlife watching opportunities.

The Byway connects the communities of Florence, Cañon City, Florissant, Victor and Cripple Creek and is configured so that it can be accessed by travelers from Florissant on the northern stretch and from Cañon City or Florence on the southern part.

